

**United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management**

**Finding of No Significant Impact
for
Environmental Assessment
DOI-BLM-AZ-A030-2021-0005-EA**

**SHIVWITS PLATEAU LANDSCAPE RESTORATION PROJECT
Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument
Location: Mohave County, AZ**

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Environmental Assessment – DOI-BLM-AZ-A030-2021-0005-EA
Shivwits Plateau Landscape Restoration Project

INTRODUCTION

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the National Park Service (NPS) have conducted an environmental analysis (DOI-BLM-AZ-A030-2021-0005-EA) to disclose and analyze the environmental consequences of implementing vegetation treatments within the Shivwits Plateau project area. This area is within Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument, which is cooperatively managed by the BLM and the NPS. The project includes a combination of manual, mechanical, and prescribed fire treatments, and related design features to move the project area toward desired conditions (as described in Section 1.3 of the EA) on both BLM and NPS lands. In total, the project includes approximately 55,000 acres of the above mentioned treatments across the 318,000-acre project planning area. This Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) informs BLM's decision making process and only applies to BLM-managed lands. Likewise, the NPS issues their own FONSI for their managed lands.

BACKGROUND

Using information from land health evaluations, existing field studies, and field reconnaissance data, across the project area, the BLM determined that vegetation across much of the project area is not necessarily meeting desired conditions. As discussed in the EA, The Monument staff have identified the need to restore vegetation in this area, at a landscape scale, to improve biodiversity, ecosystem function, and fire resiliency.

The Shivwits Plateau has been inhabited by humans since before written records. In that time, the plateau has hosted (amongst others) settlements, seasonally moving camps, herds of cattle and lumber mills. Areas of the plateau, like the Colorado Plateau of which it is part, have been burned, farmed, cleared of timber, grazed, seeded, chained, chemically treated, and been subject to fire suppression, during the last 125 years. Due in part to past practices, portions of the project area lack species diversity and desired wildlife habitat conditions. Current understanding of ecosystem dynamics suggests a more holistic and larger scale vegetation management approach than past practices on the Shivwits Plateau with the intent to decrease unintended side effects of efforts to restore and promote native plant and animal biodiversity. This project is designed to address these concerns and implement direction contained in the Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument General Management/Resource Management Plans (GMP/RMP), approved on January 29, 2008. Further details can be found in Chapter 1 of the referenced EA.

The proposed action is to address resource needs in the project area using an adaptive management approach and a combination of treatment methods that include manual, mechanical, chemical, and fire. Proposed treatments would be implemented in a staggered fashion over time and would range from several acres to several thousand acres depending on the resource management goals, funding, and desired outcomes for specific treatment areas.

The project area is important for wildlife (including mule deer, BLM sensitive species, and general wildlife species managed by Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD). Consequently, the BLM has determined the need to improve land health and provide sustainable habitat for wildlife.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

The selected action, as outlined in the decision record, has been reviewed through the interdisciplinary team process. After consideration of the environmental effects described in the EA and supporting documentation, it has been determined that the selected action is not a major Federal action and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment, individually or cumulatively with other actions in the area. No effects identified in the EA meet the definition of significant in context or intensity as described in 40 CFR 1508.27. Therefore, the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required as per Section 102 (2) of the National Environmental Policy Act. This finding and conclusion is based on the consideration of the Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) criteria for significance (40 CFR 1508.27), both with regard to the context and the intensity of impacts described in the EA and as described below.

Context:

The BLM has conducted an environmental analysis (DOI-BLM-AZ-A030-2021-0005-EA) for the aforementioned selected action located within Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument. The project planning area consists of approximately 318,000 acres of public land; however, proposed projects (manual, mechanical, and fire) will occur on up to approximately 55,000 acres of the project area, as described in the EA.

Intensity:

1. Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse.

The EA considered both the beneficial and adverse impacts of the action. The action will impact resources as described in the EA. The beneficial effects of the selected action include:

- Promoting the health, vigor, recruitment, and production of perennial grasses, forbs, and shrubs by opening pinyon/juniper and ponderosa pine canopies and reducing competition with trees for soil moisture, light, and nutrients;
- Protecting soil resources and associated watershed values by rejuvenating decadent, even-aged stands of sagebrush and invading pinyon-juniper trees, and improving the ecological condition of sites within the project area;
- Improving quantity and quality of forage for wildlife and livestock, including increases in production and quality of herbaceous plant communities;
- Improving soil productivity/stability/fertility and reducing sediment movement by 1) increasing ground cover/organic matter and thereby improving soil moisture-holding capacity and infiltration rates, 2) establishing desirable grasses and forbs in place of species such as cheatgrass.
- Increasing composition diversity, age class diversity, and vigor/production of understory plants;
- Decreasing the likelihood of invasive plant and noxious weed establishment and increase the resiliency of vegetation against such species; and
- Improved diversity and quality of wildlife habitat, resulting in an increase in the carrying capacity of the landscape and allowing it to support healthier wildlife populations – treatments will benefit mule deer in particular by removing pinyon-juniper that reduces habitat quality or thinning vegetation (primarily pinyon-juniper).
- Long-term changes to the landscape that will appear more natural over time as treatment areas are designed to blend in past chaining scars along section boundary lines.

The adverse effects of the proposed action include:

- Short-term, localized reduction in air quality from fugitive dust created by the operation of vehicles/equipment during mechanical treatments;
- Short-term economic effect on grazing permittees due to a mandatory rest period of the treatment areas to ensure the establishment, protection, and long-term viability of the vegetation treatments;
- Short-term rutting and localized soil erosion associated with use of mechanical equipment;
- Short-term effects to soils from vegetation removal by altering how vegetation intercepts rainfall, slows overland flow, and helps stabilize soils;
- Short-term and localized impacts to air quality from equipment emission/exhaust fumes;
- Short-term reduction in soil infiltration, increased erosion and sedimentation, and increased soil surface temperatures until understory species like grasses and forbs re-establish;
- Temporary disruptions associated with treatment applications, like displacement of recreators to other areas within the Monument

Chapter 3 of the EA includes a discussion of anticipated impacts to affected resources/resource uses, including air quality, land access, livestock grazing; soils; vegetation; visual resources; and wildlife (including big game, migratory birds, and BLM sensitive species). None of the environmental impacts discussed in detail in the EA are considered to be significant.

2. The degree to which the Action affects public health or safety.

No effects to public health and safety will result from implementing the selected action, since no chemicals subject to reporting under Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act, Title III in an amount equal to or greater than 10,000 pounds will be used, produced, stored, transported, or disposed of annually in association with the project. Furthermore, no extremely hazardous substances, as defined in 40 CFR 355, in threshold planning quantities, will be used, produced, stored, transported, or disposed of in association with the project. Any trash produced will be confined in a covered container and hauled to an approved landfill. Burning of waste or oil will not be done, and human waste will be contained and disposed of at an approved sewage treatment facility.

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

There are no prime farmlands, riparian areas/wetlands, or ecologically critical areas within treatment units.

Although there are NPS lands within the project area, the Monument is managed under the GMP/RMP to ensure that important Monument objects are protected. The EA analyzed impacts to Monument resources it has been determined that these resources would remain protection. The BLM will manage the vegetation treatments in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) (36 CFR 800.3). The selected action authorizes manual treatments, mechanical treatments, seeding, and erosion control construction. However, due to the project design feature of avoiding all identified cultural resources, the action will have no adverse effects on cultural resources.

There are no river segments within the project area that are designated, eligible, or suitable as wild, scenic, or recreational under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. No designated wilderness areas are within the project planning area.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

Public input regarding the proposed project was solicited during the project planning process. The BLM held public scoping from March 8 through April 7, 2021, to allow the opportunity for public comment on the proposed project. Comments were submitted in writing, by electronic mail, hand-delivered, or by facsimile to the BLM. During scoping, the BLM received a total of ten comment submittals. That input was then used to prepare the EA.

After careful consideration of preliminary issues, public scoping comments, and field-verification of existing resource conditions, the BLM/NPS interdisciplinary team developed specific treatment units totaling 55,000 acres. Design features were integrated into the proposed action to include resource protections, such as: avoiding all known cultural resources following intensive surveys, treating areas when soils are not saturated, ensuring mechanical treatment equipment is cleaned prior to use to prevent the spread of noxious weeds, and designing treatments in irregular shapes to reduce visual contrast (see the design features subheading in Section 2.2.1 of the EA). Following development of the proposed treatment units and design features, potential alternatives and related preliminary analysis were evaluated against the Council on Environmental Quality significance criteria (40 CFR §1508.27). It was determined that the anticipated effects from the treatment methods are consistent with the preparation of an EA rather than an EIS (i.e., significant impacts would not occur from implementation of the proposed action or no action alternative).

A preliminary draft of the EA was provided to the public on the BLM's ePlanning website and NPS PEPC website, and by mail upon request. A Notice of Public Comment Period/Press Release announced the availability of the EA. This was emailed and sent by mail to those who submitted scoping comments. The public comment period took place from June 2, 2021, through July 3, 2021. A total of eight comment letters were received. All comments received during development of the EA were considered and addressed in the EA (see Appendix N).

The effects of vegetation treatments, using the treatment methods outlined in the selected action (manual, mechanical, seeding, and prescribed fire), are known land management practices. These actions are well-documented, are not highly controversial, and are employed to meet resource objectives. The actions will restore vegetation communities in the project area to improve biodiversity, ecosystem function, and fire resiliency.

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

There are no known effects of the action identified and analyzed in the EA that are considered uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks. The project is not unique or unusual. The BLM has proficiency implementing similar actions in other areas within the Monument and throughout the western United States. The environmental effects to the human environment are analyzed in Chapter 3 of the EA.

6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

The selected action will not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. The action includes adaptive management, which provides management options that may be needed to adjust management decisions and actions to meet desired future conditions as determined through monitoring. Adaptive management is a decision process that promotes flexible decision making that can be adjusted in the face of uncertainties as outcomes from management actions and other events become better understood. Monitoring of these outcomes both advances scientific understanding and helps adjust policies or operations as part of an iterative and

informing process. Adaptive management recognizes the importance of natural variability in contributing to ecological resilience and productivity. It is not a “trial and error” process; rather, it emphasizes informing actions during implementation. Adaptive management does not represent an end in itself: it represents a means to more effective decisions and enhanced benefits.

The principles of adaptive management will be used to ensure treatments are meeting objectives and minimizing adverse impacts, over the course of project implementation while also considering other factors (such as drought and climate change) in the success of treatments and any adjustments in treatment methods that may be needed for future treatments to ensure success.

Any future projects outside the scope of this EA analysis will be analyzed on their own merits, independent of the actions currently selected. Completion of the EA, therefore, does not establish a precedent for other project decisions.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts – which include connected actions regardless of land ownership.

The interdisciplinary team evaluated the possible actions in the context of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions. Significant cumulative effects are not predicted. Any adverse impacts identified for the selected action, in conjunction with any adverse impacts of other past, present, or reasonably foreseeable future actions, will not result in significant impacts to natural and cultural resources. A disclosure of the effects of the action (including cumulative impacts) is contained in Chapter 3 of the EA.

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

The selected action complies with the National Historic Preservation Act. Cultural resource inventories (intensive-level Class III inventories) will be conducted prior to the implementation of any ground disturbing treatment, primarily mastication and prescribed fire, and use of any vehicular traffic outside of the areas proposed for ground disturbance. All cultural resources will be avoided, and treatment boundaries are designed to avoid undue attention to these locations and provide robust buffers from proposed treatment areas where ground disturbing activities are proposed. As such, there will be no intentional adverse effects on historic districts, cultural sites, highways, structures, or other objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places from implementation of the action. It will not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. Design features also provide mitigating measures for any inadvertent discovery of cultural and/or historical resources that may be found.

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, or the degree to which the action may adversely affect: 1) a proposed to be listed, endangered or threatened species or its habitat, or 2) a species on BLM’s sensitive species list.

The California condor is the only federally-listed species with the potential to occur in the project area. The condor is listed as endangered. In 1996, California condors were re-introduced into Arizona in the Vermilion Cliffs (on the Arizona Strip) under the Endangered Species Act’s 10(j) rule (non-essential experimental). Additional releases occurred in 1998 and 1999 from the Hurricane Cliffs (also on the Arizona Strip). For Endangered Species Act Section 7 purposes, the species is treated as a proposed species on BLM lands in this portion of the Arizona Strip. The action will not alter nest sites, roost sites, or cause disturbance to these sites as condor nesting habitat is not found in the project area, although foraging habitat may exist. Scavenging opportunities will not be impacted. Project design features are included to limit the

potential effects to condors from disturbance or ingestion of micro trash. Thus, no effect to this species is expected from the action.

In addition, there are 4 animal species listed on the BLM sensitive species list that are known or have the potential to occur within the project area; there are also eleven birds of conservation concern that may occur within the project area. These species are all listed in Chapter 3 of the EA which contains an analysis of impacts on these species. There are no known BLM sensitive plant species found within the project area.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of a federal, state, local, or tribal law, regulation or policy imposed for the protection of the environment, where non-federal requirements are consistent with federal requirements.

The action does not violate any known federal, state, local or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment. State, local, and tribal interests were given the opportunity to participate in the environmental analysis process. In addition, the action is consistent with applicable land management plans, policies, and programs.

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